

---

# Unit 4: Communication is critical for special needs bus drivers

## Overview

Unit 4 stresses the critical importance of effective communication for bus drivers transporting children with special needs.



## Unit 4 Framework

<b>Core Content Outline</b>  4.1. Unit 4 introduction 4.2. Confidentiality 4.3. Sensitivity 4.4. Communicating with school staff, parents, and aides 4.5. Asking questions and reporting problems 4.6. Unit 4 review	<b>Objectives</b>  By the conclusion of this unit, drivers will be able to:  1. Identify key characteristics of professionalism and explain its importance in improving communication.  2. Define confidentiality and explain its importance.  3. Use appropriate language when speaking with or about children with special needs.  4. Identify at least one tip for communicating effectively with school staff, parents, and aides.  5. Explain the importance of asking questions and reporting problems when transporting children with special needs.
<b>Suggested Time</b>  30 minutes	<b>Preparation</b>  1. Review Best Practice Backgrounders regarding key laws, concepts, and liability  2. Overhead projector, screen, and transparencies in place

**UNIT 4.1**  
**CORE CONTENT**  
**Unit 4 introduction**

**BEST PRACTICE  
BACKGROUND**

**Communication is critical.**

Safe transportation of children with special needs is impossible without open communication between drivers and children, drivers and school staff, drivers and parents, and between drivers and aides.

**Professionalism improves communication.**

Years ago, school bus drivers were often not seen as professionals. But times have changed. With today's higher driver standards – licensing, qualifications, testing, etc. – and with the wonderful school bus safety record that's been established, it is clear that school bus driving has become a genuine profession.

When people are perceived as professionals, communication is easier. It's just a fact of life.

**Five characteristics of professionalism.**

Professionalism includes:

- Professional attitude: courteous, good-natured, positive.
- Professional competence: informed, skilled.
- Professional commitment: clearly serious about job responsibilities, safety, etc.
- Professional appearance: pride in appearance, neat and dignified manner of dress.
- Professional language: refrains from cursing, demeaning comments and jokes, etc.

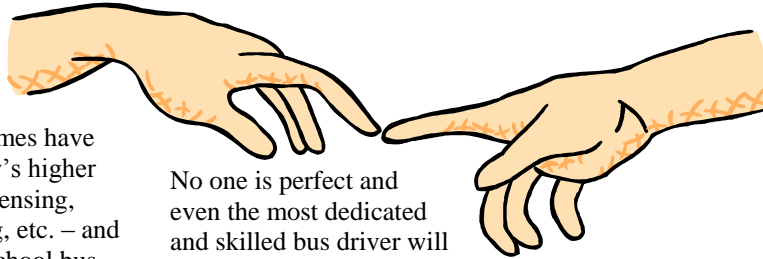
Maintaining professionalism is not always easy for a school bus

driver, just as it is not always easy for a surgeon, a police officer, or a teacher. But maintaining professional composure in pressure situations is one of the best ways to improve communication.

**Dishonesty impairs communication.** Honest communication is essential when problems arise on the bus ride.

forget it when they feel they've been deceived. Restoring trust can take a long time.

Bus drivers should strive to establish a reputation for forthright honesty. Credibility is a precious commodity.



No one is perfect and even the most dedicated and skilled bus driver will occasionally make a mistake. No matter how embarrassing, a problem should never be covered up. Most children, parents, teachers, coworkers, and supervisors will understand an honest mistake, but few people

**Instructional Strategies**

**Discussion questions**

- ✓ *Does professionalism improve communication?*
- ✓ *What are some key characteristics of professionalism?*
- ✓ *How can dishonesty impair communication?*

**Overhead transparencies**

- ✓ *Overhead 4-1: "Communication is Critical for Special Needs Bus Drivers"*

**Workbook**

- ✎ *4-1*

**UNIT 4.2**  
**CORE CONTENT**  
***Confidentiality***

**BEST PRACTICE  
BACKGROUND**

**A serious matter.** Child and family privacy is a very serious matter. Parents have sued bus drivers and school districts for unnecessarily revealing information about children. School bus drivers, aides, and other transportation staff must understand the importance of respecting the privacy of children and families.

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).**

Students' right to confidentiality regarding information about their disabilities is absolute. These rights are guaranteed by the federal Family Educational Right to Privacy Act, often referred to as the Buckley Amendment. The focus of this law is that information about children, including information about a child's disability, may not be shared with anyone unless they have a genuine need for access to the information for the safety of the child. Transportation personnel are entitled to access information necessary to carry out their responsibilities. Pertinent information about a child may be shared under emergency conditions.

According to FERPA, schools may not permit "the release of educational records...without the written consent of their parents to any individual, agency, or organization, other than...in connection with an emergency, appropriate persons if the knowledge of such information is necessary to protect the health and safety of the student or other persons."

Information about a child must only be shared within the transportation operation with those who are responsible for providing services. This would

include administrative staff and regular and substitute drivers and aides who will be serving that specific student. Parents must be assured that information kept on the bus regarding their child is maintained in a secure location.

**Living up to the trust placed in us.** Years ago, bus drivers were seldom given any information about children on their buses.



But as bus drivers have increasingly been seen as professionals who can be trusted with confidential information and with a high commitment to children's safety, schools and parents have become more

willing to share confidential information with drivers and aides. To maintain that trust, transportation staff must "hold up their own end" and not reveal information about a child to anyone else.

**Avoid gossip!** At all cost, drivers must avoid the following mistakes:

- Passing along information about a child to any other person, except in case of a true emergency when the information is needed to protect the child.
- Gossiping about a child with other drivers in the break room or diner.
- "Bad-mouthing" a child's parents with other drivers, friends, or family.

**Instructional Strategies**

**Discussion questions**

- ✓ *What is confidentiality and why is it important?*

**Overhead transparencies**

- ✓ *Overhead 4-2: "Confidentiality"*

**Workbook**

- ✎ *4-2*

**UNIT 4.3**  
**CORE CONTENT**  
***Sensitivity***

## BEST PRACTICE BACKGROUND

**Old attitudes.** Attitudes can lag behind important changes in society. Old attitudes about “the handicapped” tended to see them, on the one hand, as helpless victims deserving of pity, and on the other, as less than fully human. Not everyone has had enough personal involvement with people with disabilities to experience their diverse humanity or appreciate their natural desire for independence and dignity.

**Language is important.** Old terms can perpetuate outmoded attitudes. Sensitivity towards children with special needs begins with an examination of the language we use.

Old term	New term
Disability defines the child	Child-first language
“Disabled child”	“Child <u>with</u> a disability”
“Handicap”	“Disability” or “special need”
“ <u>Confined</u> to a wheelchair”	“ <u>Uses</u> a wheelchair”
“Afflicted with,” “suffering from,” “victim of” a disability	“Child who <u>has</u> a disability”
“Retarded”	“Child with retardation”
“Mongoloid”	“Down’s Syndrome”
“Crippled”	“Mobility impaired”
“Invalid”	“Paralyzed”

**Don’t assume children don’t understand.** One of the most insensitive and unfortunately common mistakes people make when working with children with

disabilities is to assume they don’t hear or understand a side conversation.

Children have overheard thoughtless and horrific comments from drivers such as “I don’t know why we’re bothering to take him to school” and “He’s just a vegetable.”

**Suggestions.** The following sensitivity tips come directly from children and adults with disabilities:

- “Remember that we’re people, not disabilities.”
- “Not all disabilities are the same. There is a wide range of function within a disability.”
- “Don’t be afraid of the disability. The child with a disability is not sick.”
- “Don’t talk for someone with a disability. If you don’t understand, say so.”
- “Be understanding, but save your sympathy and avoid being overprotective. Don’t
- kill with kindness. Help children with disabilities to be as independent as possible.”
- “Promise only what you can deliver.”
- “Try not to treat a student with a disability differently than any other student.”
- “Ask permission to assist, never assume we’re unable.”
- “Remember the disability is the smallest difference; we are all the same inside.”
- “Don’t let your own expectations become their limitations.”
- “Don’t be afraid to laugh with them.”
- “Avoid humiliating or embarrassing the student. Be patient.”

## Instructional Strategies

### Discussion questions

- ✓ *How have attitudes and terms about people with disabilities changed?*
- ✓ *Why is it important to never assume a child doesn’t hear or understand a conversation?*

### Overhead transparencies

- ✓ Overhead 4-3: “Sensitivity”

### Workbook

- ✎ 4-3

## BEST PRACTICE BACKGROUND

### Working with school staff.

Communication between school and transportation staff is essential. School personnel can provide accurate and up-to-date information about a child's disability, including specific strategies and tips for safely transporting the child and managing behavior problems. Similarly, school staff need to know how a child's bus ride went. If problems have developed or an incident has occurred, school personnel should be informed at once.

- Drivers should introduce themselves to school staff (classroom aides, teachers, nurses, etc.) at the beginning of the year, and should learn and use their names.
- Build credibility with school staff; never exaggerate problems that occur on the bus, for example.
- Establish a daily routine of sharing how the bus ride went with school staff who meet your bus.
- The supervisor may be able to set up an informal meeting with a child's teacher to brainstorm ideas for improving the bus ride.
- Drivers should never be pushy when trying to find someone at the school to talk with about a child. School staff may be busy. Patience and professionalism always improves communication.
- Drivers shouldn't expect magic solutions from school staff. They're often experiencing the same problems that are occurring on the bus.

### Working with

**parents.** Like their children, parents of children with special needs are diverse. Out of necessity, many have become effective advocates for their child.

- The best way for drivers to establish positive relations with parents is to model the kind of caring interaction with their child that parents would provide themselves.
- Drivers can increase parent's trust in them by being dependable and showing parents they share the same goal for their child.
- If parents make unreasonable demands or become angry, drivers must courteously ask the parent to call their supervisor. Responding with sarcasm or anger must be avoided.

**Driver – aide communication.**  
Both driver and aide have

## UNIT 4.4 CORE CONTENT

### *Communicating with school staff, parents, and aides*

important jobs, and each should acknowledge the contributions of the other.

- "Our" bus - not "my" bus.  
"Our" kids - not "my" kids.
- Neither driver nor aide should ask for personal favors or special treatment, or "cover" for each other.
- Never "bad-mouth" the other; discuss disagreements privately or ask the supervisor to intervene.
- Working in close quarters with challenging children is not easy. Drivers and aides should support each other and let the shared mission of children's safety guide them through disputes.

## Instructional Strategies

### Discussion questions

- ✓ *Why is effective communication important to a bus driver transporting children with special needs?*

### Overhead transparencies

- ✓ *Overhead 4-4a: "Communicating with School Staff"*
- ✓ *Overhead 4-4b: "Communicating with Parents"*
- ✓ *Overhead 4-4c: Driver - Aide Communication"*

### Workbook

- ✎ 4-4

## BEST PRACTICE BACKGROUNDER

**High stakes.** Anyone who is not humbled by the challenges of working with children with special needs is probably in the wrong career. The responsibility for children's lives is serious.

No book, manual, or training class can possibly cover all the situations involved in transporting children with special needs. In time, every bus driver transporting children with special needs will encounter a scenario that wasn't addressed in training. Safety procedures are constantly evolving, new categories of disabilities are regularly identified, and new equipment and technologies are frequently introduced. In short, no one knows everything about this topic. Typical unexpected problems faced by drivers include:

- Unfamiliar wheelchair – may not fit onto lift or through lift door; securement points may be difficult to locate.
- Unusual behavior problem – child acting strangely, unpredictably; behavior management tactics don't work.
- Unanticipated route or child custody problem – no one home for child; unfamiliar individual meets bus; dubious note from "parent": child demanding to be taken to another stop; etc.
- Unforeseen medical condition – child seems ill, unusually quiet, etc.

These few examples demonstrate the importance of drivers asking for guidance when faced with an unanticipated situation. For a driver transporting children with

special needs, the single most important thing to remember is to ask questions when facing any unfamiliar situation or problem. Drivers should never be embarrassed by asking for assistance or guidance. This includes asking for advice over the radio when necessary. No driver who is a true professional would belittle another for asking for help.

**Reporting problems.** Drivers are obligated to report any problem that could affect a child's well being as soon as possible. For instance:

- Signs of physical abuse. If a child boards the bus with unusual bruises, burns, or other symptoms of abuse, the driver must report it at the first opportunity. Confidentiality is a must.
- Sexual harassment. No form of sexual harassment is innocent or tolerable, and drivers must report it at once.
- Safety problems on the route or the bus. Drivers are the "eyes and ears" of the school system and often become aware of potential safety hazards along their routes before anyone else. If a bus stop does not seem safe, the driver's supervisor should be notified. And any potential mechanical problem must be reported immediately.

## UNIT 4.5 CORE CONTENT *Asking questions and reporting problems*

### Instructional Strategies

#### Discussion questions

- ✓ *Why is it important for bus drivers to ask questions about unfamiliar situations and unexpected problems?*
- ✓ *What types of problems must be reported at once?*

#### Overhead transparencies

- ✓ *Overhead 4-5: "Asking Questions and Reporting Problems"*

#### Workbook

- ✎ 4-5

**UNIT 4.6**  
CORE CONTENT  
*Unit 4 review*

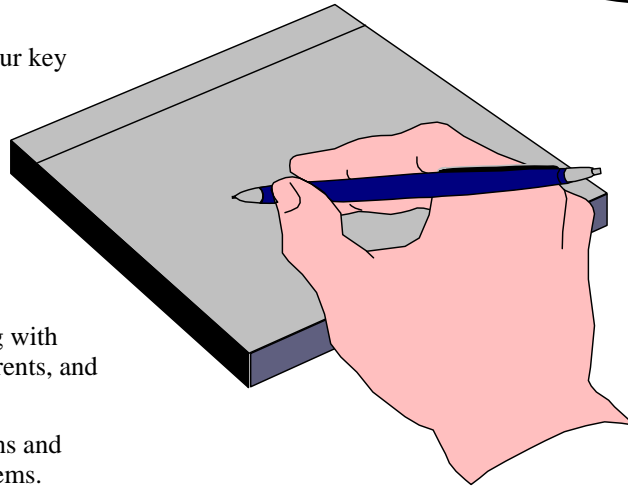
**BEST PRACTICE  
BACKGROUND**

Effective communication skills are pivotal to a bus driver's success.

This unit covered four key aspects of communication:

1. Confidentiality;
2. Sensitivity;
3. Communicating with school staff, parents, and aides; and
4. Asking questions and reporting problems.

Trainers should return to the unit's objectives to make sure all drivers in the class grasped the key points of the session. Use the Review Questions to assess their learning.



**Instructional Strategies**

**Review questions**

- ✓ *What are some key characteristics of professionalism?*
- ✓ *What is confidentiality?*
- ✓ *What is "child-first" language?*
- ✓ *Identify at least one tip for communicating effectively with school staff, parents, and aides.*
- ✓ *Why should bus drivers transporting children with special needs be willing to ask questions?*

**Overhead transparencies**

- ✓ *Overhead 4-6: "Unit 4 Review"*

**Workbook**

- ✎ *4.6*